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XIV

DEATH AND THE *URAR*

THE ORIGIN OF DEATH

THE following story concerning the origin of death is current, with minor variations, throughout this area, both in Buka and in North Bougainville.

A man died, leaving a man and a woman behind him. Before he died he said: 'You two wait three days for me.' Then he died. On the third day the man who was left said to his wife: 'You go and catch fish. I will wait for the man who died.' But the woman did not want to go and catch fish; she said: 'No, you go and catch fish, and I will wait for the man.' Her husband said: 'If you do, you must not be afraid of the man who is dead, you must give him some fire. Bring him into the house and give him fire.' So the man went out to fish. Then the man who was dead came up, and called out: 'Bring me fire!' He called again: 'Who is there? Bring me fire!' The woman saw the man, and saw that his eyes were aflame, not like the eyes of men. So she was frightened, and ran away. Then the man said: 'Oh, you have run away. Now, because you ran away, after this you and I will not be able to come back any more after we are dead, we shall go to another place altogether.'

The origin story reported from many parts of Melanesia,[1] of the old woman who changed her skin and became young again, but put on the old one because her grandchild did not recognize her, does not occur in my collection from Buka and North Bougainville. But I heard it in the Kunua mountain district of West-Central Bougainville.

NATIVE VIEWS AS TO CAUSES OF DEATH

As commonly throughout Melanesia, deaths are usually attributed to black magic; some one has 'made bad medicine' or 'poison'. Every individual goes in apprehension of meeting his end prematurely in this way, especially those who are *tsunaun*, the reason given being that they expect trouble to arise out of jealousy. But it is also recognized that people can, under certain circumstances, 'die nothing', to use an expressive pidgin-English term. The deaths

[1] Codrington, 1891, p. 260; Ivens, 1927, p. 15; &c.

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761 of children and the aged, particularly, are not infrequently attributed to what we might call 'natural causes'. Instances of both kinds came under my personal observation; among them the following are typical.

Maravin, an old man who had been in feeble health for some time, went for a walk one day, in the course of which he felt sick and vomited blood, managed to get back to his house, and shortly afterwards died. His death was explained as due to the fact that he was old, and was not in any way connected with 'poison'.

The death of Nok, a child of about two, was ascribed to a very bad sore. But that of another child, which occurred two days after its birth, was attributed to the fact that the father, a young man of 'advanced' views, had omitted to keep the couvade rules (see p. 159). The death of a child in a neighbouring village was thought by his mother's brother, who lived at Kurtatchi, to have resulted from failure on the part of his mother to look after him properly. The man was angry because he had wanted his nephew to come and stay with him, and permission had been refused by the child's father, supported by his mother, the complainant's sister, to the [578] neglect of the superior claims of her brother. This insult led him to accuse her of deliberate neglect, of which a Melanesian mother is extremely unlikely to be guilty. He was so angry that he would not go to the child's funeral.

The death of Kiwa, a middle-aged man with an unsavoury reputation for his dealings with women, was considered to have been the just punishment brought upon him by 'medicine' made by the husbands of some of the women he had 'stolen'. He had been ill for some time with what appeared to be a mastoid abscess.

Another death occurred under circumstances which elicited an interesting reaction on the part of the natives. A woman from Hanahan, W. Buka, died while on a visit to her sister at Tabut, a village about three miles from Kurtatchi, where she had come in order to be confined in her sister's house. After the village women had treated her according to their methods for twenty-four hours with no result, they sent for me and begged me to give her some 'white man's medicine'. As she was in great agony, I did so, not without misgivings, as the people were not well known to me. Eventually the child was born dead; an exceptionally large child, possibly post-mature. The woman seemed to recover, but died five days later, the symptoms resembling dysentery. Village

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opinion had it that the death of the child was due to the 'bad medicine' made by a man of Hanahan to whom its mother had refused her favours. He had intended that she should die also, but this had been prevented by my more powerful medicine. He had then renewed his efforts, this time with the desired result. Far from blaming me for the woman's death, which I had feared might be the case, they applauded me for having circumvented the man's evil intentions in the first instance.

SUICIDE

To commit suicide (*nòg boborin*) is recognized as a death for which magical intervention need not be suspected. Three methods are followed, the individual jumps off a tree or from the edge of a cliff, or hangs himself from the rafters of a hut, or swallows the chewed root of the plant *tʃū* which is also used for stunning fish.[1] No case occurred during my visit, but I was told that not long before my arrival Poa, a middle-aged man, had taken his little son (aged 5 or 6 at the time of my residence) to the edge of the cliff and had only just been pulled back in time to prevent him from throwing himself and the boy over, the reason given being that his wife had been angry and had insulted him. The brother of my next-door neighbour, Sobak, hanged himself for a similar reason. A woman now living at Ruri, the 'sister' (actually mother's sister's daughter) of one of the boys at Kurtatchi, hanged herself because her husband beat her, but was discovered in time to be resuscitated. Another woman, the mother of Matarē, also hanged herself, but 'Krapen and Tchub worked on her and she came back'. Besides these actual instances, which were corroborated by the evidence of other villagers, suicide figures in several of the stories of times past (*wasisio*) in my collection. Some or all of these may well have been authentic, but I have differentiated them from the foregoing because no names were given by which the account could be checked. The reasons given were as follows: because his wife refused him intercourse on the ground that it was too soon after her confinement and would therefore harm the child (see p. 157); because his father would not get him a wife; because some one had stolen his ceremonial currency; because he was angry with another man; because her husband beat her.

These reasons may appear extremely trivial to lead to fatal

[1] Cf. Fortune (1932), p. 50.

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On the present occasion the mother, a very old woman, had

body smeared with black paint, which was also matted into thick blobs in her hair. The widow showed none of these traditional signs of mourning, contrary to the old custom, which prescribed that the widow must put ashes on her hair and skin and must have her arms and legs rubbed with the skin of a banana which has been dipped in a mixture of red ochre and coco-nut oil. This she had to retain all the time she remained in the house. She may not eat whatever food was last eaten by her husband previous to his death. In the olden days, at the end of the period of mourning she would have become the wife of his brother, but this practice has been given up in deference to the wishes of the missionary, who encourages, while not enforcing, monogamy. It is now becoming customary for a widow not to marry again, but if a man loses his wife he usually takes another.

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Fate of the soul

I was told by one of the principal men of the village that in the olden times they thought the spirit (*abiap* in the Petats dialect, equivalent to the Kurtatchi *abin*, not to *urar* which is represented by *amat*) of the dead man came out of the hole where he was buried and came back and stayed in his house, so they destroyed the house and by this means destroyed the *abiap*. The dead man's coco-nut palms and other property were also destroyed. Now the mission has taught them to believe that the *abiap* 'goes up on top' and does not come back.

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It is thought that the *abiap* goes about looking for the person who had poisoned him. When it has found him it tells him: 'You poisoned me, you will die soon.' Soon after the man dies, and the people know it was he who poisoned the other man. This belief appears to be held still, though it is no longer customary, as in the olden days, to put a piece of bamboo through the wall of the house and question it as to who was responsible for the death. It was supposed to move about and thus to indicate the answer. They say it does not work at Petats any more, but assert that it still acts at Lontis.

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Disposal of the dead man's possessions

In the case of Tairisia, his pigs had been eaten by his relatives during his illness, at his own request. No further destruction of

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funeral of a commoner. In essentials the two are identical. Consistently with this, I have no evidence that there is considered to be any difference in the treatment of the two classes in the afterworld. Magor and Tosisiup are looked upon as the rulers of the land of the dead, but they are not connected in any way with the *tsunaun* of actual life, and among the *urar* under their jurisdiction there appears to be no distinction of persons.

Again, no stress seems to be laid on a distinction between the good and the bad, as regards either the character of their lives or the form of their deaths. I found nothing resembling the 'good' and 'bad' deaths which are reported from other areas. (Cf. Moss, 1925, p. 123, &c.) The only evidence of anything in the nature of an 'ethical' distinction is the remark attributed to Tosisiup that he would 'put in the fire' the men who made poison causing another man to die. The possibility of mission influence cannot be entirely excluded here, for though my informant was one of the older men, he was accustomed to attend the mission teacher's services, and the doctrine of punishment by fire seemed to make a special appeal to the natives, including the teacher concerned.[1]

The first part of the funerary rites seems to be directed towards keeping in touch with the spirit, the second part, from the time of the removal of the belts onwards, towards getting rid of it. The retention of the body as long as possible, the wearing of the belts, which must not have the dirt washed off them, the bringing home of the cordyline plant on which the spirit is supposed to be sitting, all point in the one direction. The removal and destruction of the belts, the lifting of all the taboos, and the fact that the widow is then free to marry again, all point in the other. There would appear to be some connexion between this difference in behaviour and the belief that the dead man takes some time to undergo the change into an *urar*. There seem to be some grounds for the suggestion that the solicitude of his relatives for him during this period may be intended to ease the transition. For example, he is provided with the food to which he is accustomed, because he has not yet learnt to eat the food of the *urar*.

Throughout the description of the funerary rites, the spirit of the dead person is never referred to as *urar*, but always as *abin*, a

[1] One of the women, who was my especial friend, was always urging me to come to the services, on the ground that, if I did not, when I died I would be 'put in the big fire'.

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No. 4. Bwapip (adult male).

When I was asleep last night, an *urar* came and lifted me up, and took me to Ura'o (part of the beach below the cliffs on which the village is situated), and turned me round, and took me to the shore, and then took me into the sea. He saw a big wave, and said: 'Go on, what are you waiting for? The sea is clear now, there are no waves.' He looked at the rough sea and threw me into it, and I called out from a big wave; it threw me on to a stone, and I called out: 'Who is beating me? I lay down. There were no men there. I thought there were some men, and I got up and went to the shore, and tried to stand up, but I fell down on to the sand. There were no men there, only *urar*. All the *urar* beat me, and they brought me to some place, I was dead; and they carried me to a hole. They put me in the hole, and I lay there; it was a very big hole. I lay there for a long time, and then the *urar* came and made me get up again. I stood up and laughed, and did not think about my skin, which had disappeared; there I was without my skin. Then I went back to my village, and all the people asked me: 'Where have you been?' I said: 'I don't know, I have been in a hole. I think the *urar* came and lifted me up.' 'No, you know, you have been talking to the *urar*.' They all made *menak* (ceremonial pudding) because I had come back, all the people made it; then they called all the *urar* and they all came and ate the *menak*. This is a good dream, it was pleasant to see. If a dream is bad, when the man wakes up he feels sick. When I woke up I felt well, I was not sick.

Of the sixteen dreams which deal with individuals, four are concerned with the death of the dreamer, who in three of them came to life again.[1] The fourth was a dream of suicide (No. 35, p. 569). Four portray the death of persons (actually living) known to the dreamer, and identified by name, and four refer to the death of persons unknown or unidentified. One is the dream of a funeral; it occurred on the night following the attendance of the dreamer (a woman) at a ritual wailing. Four are concerned with people recently dead, and form a link with the *urar* dreams, since the recently dead are in process of becoming *urar* (see p. 506). Some of them bear traces of missionary influence, as will be seen from the following example:

No. 43. Watchiu (adult male).

I dreamed about Baki, that he died. The teacher at Mosang (a

[1] In this connexion it should be noted that these people do not distinguish between death and unconsciousness due to illness or a faint. The same word is used for both, and ritual wailing will be started for a person in the latter condition, to cease suddenly when consciousness returns.

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legends in my collection, the telling of some of which may possibly have occasioned it.

No. 88. Patu (middle-aged male, village of Kohiso, Central Buka).

I dreamed about my brother who is dead. I went to look for him, and came to a big place, with big houses on each side and a road in the middle. There were a lot of people. They all asked: 'Who is this?' Some of them said: 'Oh, he is a relative of mine.' Then they beckoned me to go into a house and said it was mine. This is a good dream.

The dreams in this category are fairly evenly distributed among adults and adolescents, males and females, and give an accurate picture of the psychological importance to these people of their conception of the *urar*. The proportion of dreams involving death was undoubtedly somewhat increased by the death of two villagers within a short interval; but for many of them no immediate external cause could be assigned, other than the fear of death which is very present to every one in the community. It would be interesting to ascertain the proportion of dreams involving death in a comparable collection from our own community.

(*b*) *Incidents of everyday life.*

In this category I have placed dreams, common I take it in the experience of every dreamer, which deal with events or activities which either do, or might very well, happen in the course of an ordinary day, without being in any way unusual. They are frequently identified with incidents in the recent waking life of the dreamer. Many of them deal with the occupations associated with the provision of food, e.g. hunting, fishing, working in the taro garden, &c. They seem to be more frequent among men and boys than among women and girls, perhaps because hunting and fishing are more exciting than most of the work performed by women.

Typical of this class are the following:

No. 16. Minka (adult male).

I dreamed that I went out in a big *mon* (plank canoe) to fish for bonito, and we caught a lot of bonito; then a shark came after the *mon*. We paddled hard, but the shark was just going to catch us when I woke up.

It was this dream that gave rise to the statement that the dreamer would not go out after bonito for a few days following it.